



Taiwan and Sunnylands: The Dog That Didn't Bark

by Robert M. Hathaway

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The great fictional detective Sherlock Holmes once solved a case on the basis of something that did not happen: a dog didn't bark. Under normal circumstances, most of us might regard a silent dog as a blessing. But as Holmes' culprit discovered to his sorrow, there can be a downside to an otherwise happy circumstance.

Take the recent "shirtsleeve summit" between President Obama and China's new president, Xi Jinping, at the Sunnylands estate of deceased publisher Walter Annenberg. Discussion of cybersecurity, North Korea, climate change, and Chinese concerns about the US rebalance or "pivot" to Asia dominated the two days' proceedings at Sunnylands. Remarkably absent was any substantive discussion of Taiwan.

Why "remarkably"? Because Chinese bullying of Taiwan has been a contentious issue between Washington and Beijing for more than 60 years. Objectively, little has changed. China continues its military buildup across the Taiwan Strait opposite the island. China continues to restrict Taiwan's international space and to block its aspirations to play a role in regional and global affairs commensurate to its wealth and the talents of its people. China continues to regard Taiwan as a wayward province whose return to the motherland is non-negotiable, no matter what the inhabitants of the island may want.

Chinese sources speculate that at Sunnylands, Xi reiterated Chinese objections to US arms sales to Taiwan. Even if this is accurate, Taiwan seems to have been little more than an afterthought at the summit.

Similarly, in a major address earlier this year, Tom Donilon, Obama's national security advisor, gave a detailed explanation of the administration's Asia policy without the word "Taiwan" escaping his lips. No reference to tensions between China and Taiwan, no reiteration of a US interest in the peaceful resolution of differences between Beijing and Taipei.

In an important sense, Taiwan's disappearance as a major source of China-US friction is good news. As recently as the mid-1990s, President Clinton felt compelled to send a naval task force steaming toward the Taiwan Strait as a warning to Beijing to back off. US security analysts have long worried about an armed clash with China touched off by the PRC's relentless pressure on Taiwan.

But even good news can carry unfortunate repercussions. The relative eclipse of Taiwan as an irritant in US-China

relations and the welcome diminution of cross-Strait tensions should not become an excuse for either the United States or the rest of the world simply to forget Taiwan.

Taiwan's absence from important international forums works to everyone's disadvantage. Earlier this year, for instance, a Taiwanese businessman contracted the H7N9 strain of bird flu while visiting the mainland. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this strain of bird flu is highly lethal and more easily transmitted to humans than earlier strains. Bird flu does not respect passports or national boundaries; every person around the globe has a personal stake in the effort to understand and contain this disease. Yet China continues to block Taiwan's membership in the WHO, the international organization best placed to track the spread of H7N9.

Nor is Taiwan permitted to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), although Taipei voluntarily adheres to UNCLOS guidelines. In May, a Taiwanese fisherman was shot to death by a Filipino coastguard vessel in waters that both Taiwan and the Philippines claim as their exclusive economic zone. For several weeks tensions between these two US friends soared to dangerous levels; Taiwan slapped sanctions on Manila and conducted naval exercises in the contested waters, while hackers on both sides launched cyber attacks on the other. Formal Taiwanese membership in UNCLOS might not have prevented the fisherman's death, but it almost certainly would have provided diplomatic and legal mechanisms to defuse the situation before it assumed crisis proportions.

In like fashion, Taiwan is barred from the International Civil Aviation Organization, even as an observer, even though 40 million travelers each year pass through air space monitored by Taiwan's civil aviation trafficking authorities.

Even on trade, Taiwan is relegated to the sidelines. While the United States and Taiwan enjoy robust bilateral trade relations, amounting to \$85 billion in goods and services in 2011, the Obama administration has displayed no interest in having Taiwan join the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the signature economic component of the administration's rebalance. More broadly, Taiwan's place in the rebalance remains undefined.

US presidents from Nixon to Obama have found compelling reasons of "realpolitik" to court China, even when doing so has meant disadvantaging our friends on Taiwan. In recent years such reasoning has been based upon the belief that the future of the 21st century may well be determined by the nature of the bilateral US-China relationship, which is now and will be for the foreseeable future a rocky one.

Facing these obstacles, Taiwan must seize opportunities where it can. This it does not always do. I recently

participated in an overseas meeting of think tanks from more than 20 Asian countries. Several Taiwanese think tanks were invited to attend but never responded to the invitations. Undoubtedly complex political calculations lay behind the decision not to participate. Yet, one can't help considering this a missed opportunity.

Xi Jinping has spoken cryptically of the need for "a new type of great-power relationship" governing ties between China and the United States. Analysts hoped that the Chinese leader would fill in the blanks on what he has in mind during his recent meeting with Obama. Whatever greater understanding emerged from Sunnylands, however, gauging Chinese intentions and the sweep of Beijing's ambitions remains very much a work in progress.

But several things seem certain. The United States is closely linked to Taiwan by political and strategic considerations, economic interest, family ties, and a common allegiance to political freedom and individual dignity. Americans justly applaud the remarkable economic and political transformation that has, in a single generation, produced an economic miracle and a beacon of democracy in Taiwan.

In its quite proper desire to create a workable long-term relationship with the rising power in Beijing, Washington, like Sherlock Holmes, must be mindful that even a dog that doesn't bark may still have much of importance to tell us. In pursuit of new partners on the international scene, we must not forget old friends.

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